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ABSTRACT

This report describes Biblored, the library network in Bogota, Colombia, that received the 2002 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Access to Learning Award. Biblored is a network of 19 libraries that attract about 200,000 users per month and serve some of the poorest neighborhoods in Bogota. The network's success in making information and information technology accessible to city residents, and in developing services and programs geared toward users' special needs and interests, earned it the award, which includes a one-million dollar grant to expand services. Drawing on extensive interviews of the network's users and planners, this report tells the story of how the library network was born, the challenges it has faced, and the impact it has had on the lives of Bogota residents. (Author)

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Biblored
Colombia's Innovative Library Network

MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

February 2003

Council on Library
and Information Resources

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MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

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Council on Library
and Information Resources
Washington, D.C.

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MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

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The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) is an independent, nonprofit organization that works to expand access to information, however recorded and preserved, as a public good.

In partnership with other organizations, CLIR helps create services that expand the concept of "library" and supports the providers and preservers of information. Through projects, programs, and publications, CLIR works to maintain and improve access to information for generations to come.

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Margaret Re/fe design
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of Colombia, María Cristina Caballero is an award-winning journalist. Currently, she is a fellow at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University. Ms. Caballero was director of investigations at *Semana*, Colombia's leading weekly newsmagazine, from 1998 to 2001. Previously, Ms. Caballero worked at *Cambio* (a newsmagazine) and at *El Tiempo* (Colombia's main daily newspaper). She has held fellowships in Harvard's Nieman and Mason programs.

Ms. Caballero won Colombia's highest journalistic honor, the Simon Bolivar National Prize in Journalism, in 1998 for her exclusive interview with Carlos Castaño, leader of Colombia's paramilitaries. She won the same award in 1991 for a series of investigative reports on corruption in her country's National Notary and Property Registration Institute. Ms. Caballero received the World Press Freedom Award from the United States-based Committee to Protect Journalists in 1999. Her commentaries have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Miami Herald*, among other news outlets.

"This award is an exceptionally refreshing encouragement for our embattled country.... Through our library system, we have improved the lives of millions of children and adults by offering new educational, recreational, and cultural opportunities that fight against boredom, frustration, and violence. This project provides the foundation to achieve peace in a more egalitarian society."

MARGARITA PEÑA
Secretary of Education
District of Bogotá

CORTESÍA MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

Bogotá's secretary of education, Margarita Peña, talks with one of the youngest users of the El Tunal library.

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PREFACE

Colombia's Biblored (Capital Network of Public Libraries) was honored with the 2002 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Access to Learning Award, which is administered by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). Biblored, which received the U.S. $1-million grant to expand its services, was recognized for its success in providing free and innovative access to information for the people of Bogotá, particularly those in low-income areas.

This case study outlines how Biblored was created, funded, designed, and implemented in just four years. It demonstrates the power and popularity of public libraries in a war-torn, conflicted society. At the same time, it shows how educational and cultural opportunities offered by public libraries can change people's lives in profound ways.

The Access to Learning Award is given annually to a library or comparable organization outside the United States to recognize accomplishments in making information technology accessible without charge to the public, particularly underserved communities. The award is presented in August at the annual meeting of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (www.ifla.org). CLIR, which began administering the award in November 2001, solicits applications with an annual deadline of February 28. An international advisory committee of librarians and information technology experts reviews the applications and selects the recipient. The 2002 competition drew more than 130 applications from 65 countries.

Biblored is the third recipient of the Access to Learning Award. In 2001, the award was given to Guatemala's Proyecto Bibliotecas (Probigua) and the Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación in Argentina. The Helsinki City Library of Finland was the first award recipient in 2000.

CLIR appreciates the opportunity to administer the Access to Learning Award, which would not be possible without the generosity of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ALICE BISHOP
Special Projects Associate
CLIR

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This report could not have been possible without the cooperation of Colombia's Minister of Education, Cecilia María Velez; the Secretary of Education of Bogotá, Margarita Peña; the former Mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa; Director of the Colombian National Libraries Plan, Lina Espitaleta; Biblored's Manager, Catalina Ramírez; and Jorge Orlando Melo, Director of Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango.

The author would like to thank the Dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Joseph S. Nye Jr., for his support and special interest in Colombia. She also is grateful for the support of the Kennedy School's Mason Program and the Harvard Center for Public Leadership. Finally, she wishes to acknowledge the support of her husband and favorite editor, John Lenger.

Colombia, the Nation

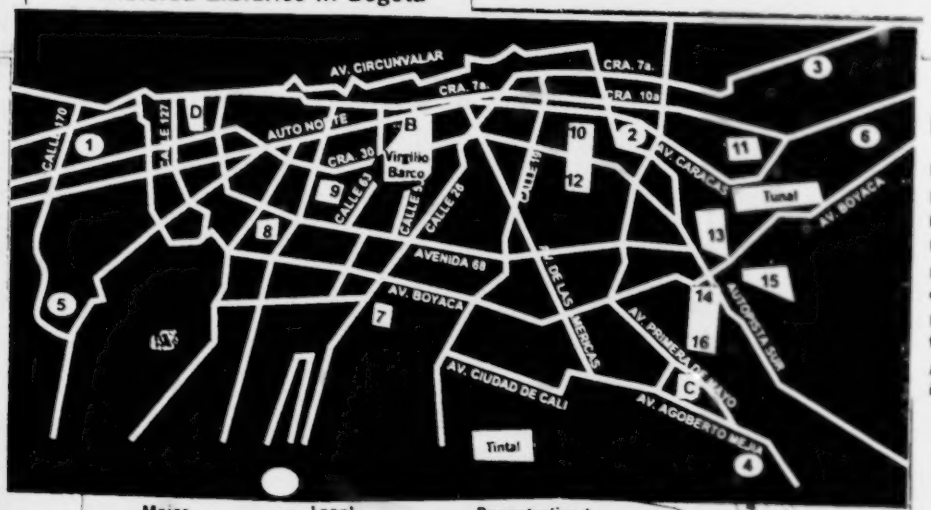
Forty years of civil war and more than a decade of "narco-terrorism" have battered Colombia's civil institutions, seriously undermining Latin America's oldest democracy. Almost 40,000 Colombians have been killed in the past decade. Approximately 2 million of Colombia's 41 million people are poverty-stricken refugees who have left their villages to escape the violence.

Colombia has been confronting a crisis of governance. The homicide rate is the world's highest, and the poverty rate is growing. Sixty-four percent of the population lives under the poverty line.

Home to more than 6 million people, Bogotá is one of Latin America's largest cities and Colombia's economic center. It contributes 26 percent of Colombia's gross domestic product and has 15 percent of the country's total school-age population—some 1.5 million children and teenagers. Bogotá's population has been growing rapidly because of internal conflict and violence in rural areas. The capital shelters about 100,000 new people each year. Colombia's Secretary of Education says about 80 percent of the city's inhabitants live in poverty.

Given the city's serious challenges, its mayoral administrations did not emphasize access to information by creating a modern network of public libraries. Consequently, in the mid-1990s, Bogotá had almost no suitable spaces providing information, knowledge, research opportunities, or culture other than the Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango (BLAA) which was always crowded.

Biblored Libraries in Bogotá



Major Libraries

- Virgilio Barco
- El Tunal
- El Tintal

Local Libraries

1. Servitá
2. Restrepo
3. La Victoria
4. Bosa
5. Suba
6. La Martichuela

Decentralized Libraries

7. C.O.L. La Giralda
8. Las Ferias
9. San Fernando
10. Ricaurte
11. C.O.L. Rafael Uribe Uribe
12. Puente Aranda
13. C.O.L. Venecia
14. Nuevas Delicias
15. Perdomo
16. C.O.L. Timiza

Biblored at a Glance

Number of libraries	19
Number of public access computers	328
Number of books	185,000
Monthly average of users	200,000
Number of full-time employees	177
Annual budget in US dollars	$2,173,000

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Biblored, Capital Network of Public Libraries, was the brainchild of Enrique Peñalosa, mayor of Bogotá from 1998 to 2001. Peñalosa made the network a key part of the city's development plan early in his term. "I decided to promote a different vision, a different lifestyle in Bogotá. We should not focus our efforts on measuring citizens' success through their per-capita incomes, but through the development of their potential by providing them opportunities to improve the quality of their lives," Peñalosa said. "That's why I focused efforts on building libraries and parks, dramatically improving the transportation system, and opening bicycle routes," he added.

In a city where so many residents live in poverty, Biblored offers access to computers, technology, and books free of charge. With the creation of Biblored, libraries have also become centers of community development activities in disadvantaged parts of the city. Over the last four years, Biblored has built three large, modern public libraries—El Tintal, El Tunal, and Virgilio Barco—in renovated city parks in Bogotá. The project has also upgraded 16 local and neighborhood libraries that now attract an average of 10,000 visitors each day. The network has approximately 328 computers for public use and approximately 185,000 volumes.

"Biblored has helped link the people of Bogotá with the world of digital information. We hope that this remarkable project to improve public access to information in Colombia will serve as a model for other countries."

RICHARD AKEROYD
Director of International Library Initiatives
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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El Tintal is one of three major libraries built as part of Biblored. Situated on the site of an abandoned garbage transfer station, the library attracts more than 2,000 users on weekdays.

Equal Access for All

Biblored is helping to create "social tissue," offering educational, cultural, and recreational activities to residents of all sectors of the city, particularly those struggling with social problems. The libraries have the challenge of offering constructive, community-based alternatives to children, teenagers, senior citizens, and the unemployed, and give them opportunities to become more engaged and productive citizens. At the same time, the libraries are intended to promote peace by offering constructive alternatives for the use of free time.

Cecilia María Vélez White, former Secretary of Education in Bogotá who was recently named Colombia's Minister of Education, says that Biblored is an innovative and ambitious project aimed at providing equal access to education and culture for all citizens. "The increasing number of users of the new libraries proves that lower-income families are learning the benefits of building on their educational and cultural potential," she said.

Jorge Orlando Melo, director of Colombia's biggest library, the Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango (BLAA), supported Biblored's creation and now reports that Biblored doubled the number of library users in Bogotá—from 3.5 million to 7 million—between 2000 and 2002. Melo estimated that Biblored provided Internet service to about 2.4 million

users in 2002. Access to Internet services has not been at the expense of books, which are used extensively.

Today, thousands of people regularly use Biblored services. Biblored's impact is illustrated by the experience of 12-year-old Luis Cárdenas. When a large white building suddenly appeared in Cárdenas' neighborhood, it piqued the young boy's curiosity. Instead of roaming the streets, he began spending his days at the library, engrossed in workshops on technological tools and reading incentives. "I'd rather be here and not on the street, learning what I shouldn't," said Cárdenas. Library staff soon helped Cárdenas enroll in school. He says the library has given him the "opportunity to learn, to know the world, to become someone, to dream, to travel in time and space—without spending money."

Another example is 75-year-old Olga Bravo, who migrated to Bogotá from a rural region plagued by violence. After attending a three-week training program, Mrs. Bravo, who had learned only basic reading and writing when she was a farm girl, says, "I feel as if I were born again. I had not even dreamed of learning about computers and the Internet. Now, I can be useful. I will help educate my 26 grandchildren. I will teach them about computers."

CRÉDIT: MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

Olga Bravo, a 75-year-old woman who fled her town because of violence, attended a workshop about computers at El Tunal library. She plans to teach her 26 grandchildren what she learned.

The Initial Vision: Libraries as "Urban Temples"

In 1998, when Mayor Peñalosa, an economist, decided to make a library network part of Bogotá's development plan, he envisioned "urban temples"—islands of civilization in the midst of the country's grinding poverty and long-simmering civil war. He led a massive effort to improve living conditions in poor neighborhoods by providing educational opportunities and promoting citizen involvement. His administration opened new schools, built and renovated city parks, and planted trees. It transformed and modernized the public transportation system, and even expanded the city's bicycle routes.

Biblored was a key symbol of Peñalosa's plan. "The three new libraries are as big as cathedrals," he said. "They symbolize the importance that the city wanted to place on education and intellectual development, which also allow citizens to appreciate life more."

Credit: MARÍA CRISTINA CARRILLO

Aleja Camacho, who works as a maid, brings her two daughters to Suba's local library so they can do homework.

The former mayor, interviewed for this report in November 2002, added that the libraries were designed to be monuments to human dignity. "Every citizen is invited to use them and to be well-treated, to feel important just because he or she is a Colombian citizen. I strongly believe that the real learning process happens when it takes place by your own initiative, when you are motivated to learn. Bill Gates is an example of how the individual is capable of learning and progressing by him or herself."

Peñalosa knew Bogotá needed more public libraries because he frequently saw long lines in front of the BLAA. "I was also impressed to know that it was one of the most used all over the world," he added. In fact, Peñalosa lived in different U.S. cities, where he gained an appreciation for public libraries as part of a civilized life.

The goal of Peñalosa and his team was to create a library system that would offer free access to information, particularly digital information. With this in mind, some of the new libraries were built in sections of the city where children had very few social or educational options. "There, Biblored's libraries now serve as a beacon of hope," commented Vélez White, who was in charge of implementing the project. "Through the new libraries, people can enjoy access to information that will help them not only solve inquiries but socialize with their neighbors." Today, "Bogotá, City of Libraries" and "road of knowledge for Bogotá" are frequently used as slogans.

In developing countries, Peñalosa noted, car owners are usually the people who wield the power. "As a result, they are able to dominate policies, with major investments frequently going into roads," he said. Peñalosa's new emphasis on public libraries changed all that. "We didn't pave all the streets. Part of that budget went to Biblored and other projects that would benefit low-income populations and provide them opportunities to develop their potential," he stated.

"Libraries allow us to be more educated," he added. "If we can get more knowledge, we can see how insignificant are the causes of conflict—in contrast with the universe, world history, and scientific and technological advances. Libraries promote thinking and intelligent and civilized debates. The libraries provide space for our future writers and scientists. Libraries allow us to build ourselves as individuals and communities and promote equality. If we are able to develop our human potential, we will probably be able to coexist better and be less conflicted."

Part of a Broader Education and Technology Initiative

Biblored is part of a broader project aimed at improving education and the use of technology in Bogotá. The first goal was to wire the public schools into an integrated education network to enable online learning. This project, known as "Red P,"* was authorized in the last month of the administration of the mayor, Antanas Mockus, who preceded Peñalosa. It was financed with a $42-million loan from Spain. During Peñalosa's term, 14,000 computers were installed in 662 public schools. This network offers virtual and collaborative learning centers as well as interactive learning projects.

The second goal was to increase the number of students enrolled in public schools. Under the Vélez White regime, the number of students enrolled in public schools increased 30 percent. Many of those students came from vulnerable areas.

According to Vélez White, more than 150 schools were upgraded, 24 existing schools were totally rebuilt, 25 new schools were constructed, and 100 kindergartens were created. Vélez White asked the directors of some of Bogotá's best private schools to administer the new public schools built in disadvantaged sectors of the city and, to the surprise of many, they accepted the challenge.

"Lately, innumerable challenges have risen, especially related to the appropriation and use of technology. The final challenge will be to integrate the technological facilities in a creative way into the educational arena," concluded Vélez White.

Bogotá's Information Deficit

A study ordered by Vélez White in 1998 and directed by librarian Lina Espitaleta, who later was named director of the National Libraries Plan, revealed a critical information deficit in the city, particularly in poorer areas (Espitaleta and Palomino 1998).

When the study was undertaken, Bogotá had 105 public libraries. Many were very politicized, according to Biblored officials. "We found that some City Council members opened a library with a few schoolbooks and one employee, and after getting votes, just forgot about it," one official said. "Others opened incipient libraries in order to provide employment to a friend or relative."

The libraries were understaffed. Seventy-five percent had only one employee, 18 percent had two employees, and 7 percent had three employees. The libraries were also plagued by decreasing budgets, which meant reduced hours and services and little access to information technology. Only BIAA, which contained 90 percent of the books in the library system, had adequate staff and equipment. Not surprisingly, it was severely overcrowded.

Nevertheless, Biblored began integrating and strengthening some of the better functioning libraries. Today, some of these local and neighborhood libraries are administered by the Social Welfare Department of the District, private enterprises, and nongovernmental organizations. Biblored officials work with these organizations to improve library services across the city.

* *The use of "red" comes from the Spanish word for "network."*

The Initial Goals

The study defined public libraries as dynamic institutions promoting education and culture by providing free access to information resources.

BLAA's director and the director of the Pilot Library of Medellín, Gloria Inés Palomino, served as advisors to the study. The study examined the shortage of books and the need for a comprehensive, citywide network. It established the following goals for Biblored, some of which drew on studies about library usage:

— Create and strengthen reading habits in young children; support citizens motivated to learn by themselves through self-education; promote creativity and stimulate the imagination of children, teenagers, and adults. (UNESCO 1996)

— Promote respect for cultural inheritance and knowledge of cultural patrimony, the arts, and scientific innovations. (Palomino 1998)

— Provide access to a variety of cultural activities as a way to promote personal development and enhance cohesion among communities. Promote intercultural dialogue and acceptance of diversity. (UNESCO 1995)

— Promote oral traditions.

— Facilitate access to community-based activities and celebrate achievements; promote community development programs. Offer up-to-date information to local institutions, professional associations, and interest groups. (Mejía 1991)

— Promote the use of new information technologies.

In response to these goals, Biblored's libraries were located strategically to serve at least 70 percent of the school-age population and 40 percent of the adult population—about 3.4 million people in all.

THE PLAN AND ESTIMATED COSTS

The 1998 study set forth the initial description of the Biblored implementation plan. Stages in this plan included the preparation of manuals, estimate of costs, study of demand, and identification of priorities. The plan also addressed technical, financial, legal, and administrative procedures. It had the following components:

— Identify locations and establish the potential impact of the libraries.

— Devise a system of accountability and controls that is consistent with budget constraints.

— Devise architectural plans and define contracts.

— Create an administrative power structure, management process, and norms.

— Define goods, infrastructure, and services.

— Select and train staff, including a general manager for the project.

— Devise a communications program to project image and promote campaigns.

Initial investments in Biblored began in 1998 as part of the city's three-year development plan. Four years later, the city had established the Biblored project at a cost of $17.4 million. That sum does not include the parks and bicycle routes around the libraries. "That is the budget that was spent

CHRIS BELL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION PHOTOGRAPHY, BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

by the Secretary of Education, but we also delegated contracts to other institutions, such as the Institute for Recreation and Sports," said Peñalosa. "That Institute, for example, was in charge of building the park around the Virgilio Barco Library, the largest one." The cost of land would have increased the price considerably. "If we had had to pay for the land on which the Virgilio Barco Library was built, it would have cost about $6 million."

Each library in Biblored offers a variety of programs and training sessions for users of all ages. These programs range from story times for children to specialized computer literacy sessions for senior citizens.

DESIGN PLANS

The study outlined the parameters for the construction of each library. The mayor made final decisions about locations and then sought the necessary funds, pointing out that it was one of his administration's priorities.

Contests were held to select the architects who would design the new libraries. Contest guidelines stipulated that each library be modern and that it offer a wide range of services, such as open collections, digital information, multimedia packages, video and audio rooms, and specialized learning areas for children. The guidelines stressed Biblored's goal of supporting educational development.

The mayor, secretary of education, general manager, and Espitaleta were among those who oversaw the project. Espitaleta insisted that all libraries share a database dedicated to public access, catalogs and controls, circulation and loan systems, periodicals, acquisitions, and reserve academic material.

Advancing the Process: Collections and Services

Another challenge in creating Biblored was deciding what types of collections would be most useful. A team was formed to provide guidance. The team prepared a manual regarding selection policies, objectives, types of users, and priorities within the social sciences, humanities, pure sciences, applied sciences, and specialized collections.

The team took into account exclusive, investigative, and basic collection levels. Team members prepared detailed lists of the types of materials to be included in the collections. Before making any decisions, the team consulted specialists (mainly from the BLAA), examined demonstration materials, analyzed user profiles, and consulted employees. Collections team members not only purchased volumes but also received donations from enterprises and individuals.

Initially, each of the three major libraries had approximately 25,000 volumes. Their capacity is far greater, approximately 150,000 volumes per library. There is seating space for 600 patrons. In 2003, Biblored plans to double the number of volumes in each of the three major libraries. Because the collections are so limited, library patrons cannot borrow books. By the end of 2003, however, the libraries will be equipped for lending.

The 16 smaller libraries in the Biblored network are located strategically throughout the city so that no resident lives more than one kilometer from a branch. The average size of these libraries is 500 square meters. Users can consult the library catalog online from the branch libraries as well as from the main facility. Biblored has a computer link to BLAA and the Caja Colombiana de Subsidio Familiar-Colsubsidio Library systems.

The small neighborhood libraries administered by Colsubsidio existed before Biblored. Espitaleta points out that the network integrates its work with a number of institutions such as Colsubsidio and the Chamber of Commerce of Bogotá, which is in charge of the administration of the "Bogotá Rooms" opened in each one of the three big new libraries.

Children's rooms offer general information, literature, reference books, and magazines. General rooms contain information in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and technology. Reference materials include dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, yearbooks, guides, and directories.

"One of the most important areas of development in the Biblored project is access to technology as a learning and operational tool," observed Vélez White. Users access the Internet and other technology-based information, such as databases and specialized software.

Now Biblored offers training in computer skills to children, teenagers, and adults of all ages. There are also specialized courses for elementary and high school teachers to help them teach their students how to use computers.

Other programs are dedicated to user guidance, instructions on the use and handling of library materials, promoting literacy, storytelling, workshops, meetings with writers, cultural programs (exhibitions, theater, music), writing workshops, forums, and movies.

CREDIT: MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

Luisa and Natalia, 10 and 6 years old, are playing learning games at Virgilio Barco Library.

Overcoming Obstacles

During the formative stages, while librarians were creating multiple services and acquiring collections, Biblored encountered a number of financial, administrative, political, and legal obstacles.

Critics questioned the project, stating it was a luxury and should not have been a priority. Peñalosa countered that the libraries were necessary to provide citizens basic information they needed to improve their lives. At the same time, he argued that the libraries were to be cost-efficient buildings and would showcase some of the country's best architects. "It was important for the libraries to be a symbol of hope for the city, also to provide an excellent service to underserved neighborhoods," he said. "Of course, in order to finance Biblored, we didn't pave many streets, but I knew that to pave streets was going to be a project assumed by any other administration. It was not likely that another administration would give priority to building a network of libraries," he said.

Some political opponents objected that libraries had become obsolete in the Internet era. "I expressed a total disagreement with that view. They complement each other," Peñalosa said.

At the outset, there were tensions between Biblored's general manager and Vélez White. In the end, a new general manager was retained.

Initially, the Virgilio Barco Library was a joint project between the Mayor's office and the governor of the neighboring state of Cundinamarca. A lot owned by the Department of Welfare, State of Cundinamarca, was identified for the library; library patrons could use train service to visit the library. The process in the governor's office was so slow that the mayor decided to look for alternatives. It was necessary to initiate legal action to recover land donated by a previous administration to Millonarios, a local soccer club. "Incredible but true. The soccer club had not made any investment in the land," said Peñalosa. "On the contrary, it was charging people to deposit trash construction materials there. The lot's level had gone up by six meters. Just the excavations to find solid ground and to remove the trash cost $180,000."

The original plan called for four new libraries. The library for the Suba section in north Bogotá was never built because the project ran out of money. The land and design of architect Carlos Morales are ready, however, should funds become available. "Suba's council members and the owners of the land where the library was initially planned to be built didn't help a lot," said Peñalosa. "Some were trying to get more money than the legal market price. It was necessary to look for another place for the library and we lost a lot of time."

Biblored's current general manager, Catalina Ramirez, says that local booksellers were initially skeptical of the project. "They considered the project direct competition to their industry. It was necessary to explain that the beneficiaries of the project didn't have, in general, the buying power to get books," said Ramirez.

In overcoming obstacles, coalitions with other institutions proved invaluable. The Secretary of the Treasury expedited the legal process to remove abandoned machines in a building previously dedicated to processing trash that was transformed into the El Tintal Library. Treasury also helped get resources to build parks around the Virgilio Barco and El Tintal Libraries when the project was running short on cash. The mayor's Secretary General Office helped deal with legal problems relating to reclaiming the land that had been donated to the soccer club. The planning, water, and telephone departments also helped. The Police Department removed hundreds of cars recovered from thieves that had been dumped on the land needed for El Tintal's park. The Institute of Recreation and Sports helped remove squatters who were living on land assigned to the Virgilio Barco Library.

The Network's Daily Impact

Many people who use the Biblored computers are poor; they are also young. Children, youth and young adults, who account for approximately 33 percent of Bogotá's population, are among the frequent beneficiaries of the project.

Visitors of all ages enthusiastically use the computers. After attending an introductory training course in Word and Excel, 13-year-old Javier Rojas decided he wants to study systems engineering when he finishes high school. He had not considered it before, but after learning some of the "secrets of the Internet," he does not miss a day in the computer lab at the library. Rojas' mother is a maid; his father is a night guard.

Each of the three major libraries has more than 6,000 square meters of space and the capacity to serve about 600 users simultaneously. The space includes reading rooms where general reference collections may be found, newspapers, individual and team work stations with Internet access, project rooms, music rooms, and training rooms, as well as children's reading and playrooms equipped with Internet access and multimedia packages. Each library also has a room dedicated to local Bogotá issues and auditoriums and multipurpose rooms that offer space for community meetings.

Types of Training and Programs Offered

In response to users' demands, each library organizes a different daily schedule of courses and activities. Here are some examples:

Unicornio training at El Tunal and Virgilio Barco. The objective is to train users in the use of the Biblored catalog. Patrons who have undergone such training can obtain information on the library's resources before they consult the bookshelves. Offered monthly, the training teaches basic skills in Boolean and advanced searches.

Systems training for teenage users at El Tunal. Youngsters who participate in this course learn about computer software and hardware, including Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint), multimedia packages, the Internet, and Biblored's catalog. They are taught about search programs as well as about information recovery and storage.

Teacher training at El Tunal. The course is intended to train future trainers on the use and services of the library. Each module contains four sessions, generally held on Saturdays. The course includes knowledge of the computer, multimedia packages, the Internet, and Biblored's Unicornio catalog.

Computer literacy for senior citizens at El Tunal. In this course, senior citizens learn to use the library catalog, Internet, and multimedia packages.

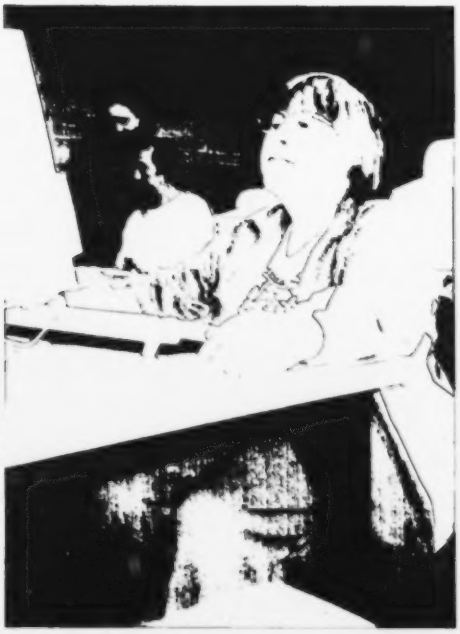
Computer literacy for children. Children receive training on the library catalog, Internet, and multimedia. The sessions are usually held on Saturday.

Technological tools and promoting literacy for children at El Tintal. Through this 10-hour workshop, children learn to use Microsoft Word, the Internet, and Microsoft Encarta.

Microsoft Office training for teenagers and adults at El Tintal. Youngsters and adults learn Microsoft Office and how to navigate the Internet. The course also teaches basic skills for writing résumés and developing research projects and reports.

Internet for teenagers and adults at every library. In three Saturday sessions, users learn to use the Internet as a research tool. Users learn basic and meta searches, search strategies, and search sequences.

"Listen, feel, and communicate" at El Tintal. This project is for users who are blind or visually impaired. The Institute for the Blind donated a Braille system, software, a machine that reads texts, and a special printer. The library has 163 Braille books and 60 digital-audio books. Biblored staff and volunteers read books for blind patrons and organize discussions about the readings.



MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

Fernanda, a member of the "Grandparents' Corner" group, is exploring the Internet.

The Grandparents' Corner. Senior citizens share their knowledge and traditions. Some of the libraries are compiling the history of different neighborhoods as told by grandparents.

Promoting reading through new technologies/workshop for children. Library staff read a story and children create illustrations on computers, pointing out key elements of the story.

Listening with your eyes workshop. This program is geared to people with hearing problems, through the support of specialized institutions.

Workshops for displaced children. This project invites children who have been displaced by violence to read books, participate in academic games, and do other kinds of constructive activities with other children.

Reading in hospitals. Groups of volunteers, guided by Biblored staff, read to sick children in hospitals.

Myths and local traditions. Local citizens discuss local history. Professionals facilitate the discussion.

Teenagers' programs. Library staff members promote discussions among young people who have watched movies and heard speakers. They also organize concerts and presentations of young musicians. Some libraries are encouraging teenagers to publish monthly newsletters with their views.

Among other programs are oral expression workshops, reading sessions in extremely poor neighborhoods, and reading programs in jails. The new libraries are also organizing art exhibitions with the support of institutions such as the BLAA.

The Three Major Libraries

VIRGILIO BARCO

Built in the middle of Simon Bolivar Park, this library—Biblored's largest—is visited every weekend by an average of 8,000 people. The library welcomes about 2,000 visitors each weekday. Named in honor of a former Colombian president, the library opened its doors in November 2001, after an investment of about $7 million. Designed in the round, it allows visitors a 360-degree view of the city through its windows and terrace.

The library has 73 Internet and multimedia posts. Of these, 38 are in the Internet and multimedia room, 30 are in the children's room, and 5 are in the periodicals room.

The children's room contains 74 chairs; the general reading room has 280. There are 98 chairs in the literature area, 31 in periodicals, 30 in the reference room, and 95 are available for multiple purposes. The library has 29 video and audio posts, an auditorium that seats 414, and a music room with 150 seats.

One of Colombia's best-known architects, Rogelio Salmona, was in charge of the design. His goal was to build a library for people to enjoy—a place where patrons would feel free to wander around and find an abundance of opportunities. Salmona integrated the structure into an esplanade with restaurants, a garden surrounded by water channels, and places where people can walk and ride their bikes. The library's terrace offers playgrounds and an open-air theater.

Initially, the library was 7,000 square meters, but Salmona integrated 3,000 more square meters into the space by taking over open-air parking lots. Now, the parking lots are in the basement.

This large library houses the administrative offices for Biblored. Art exhibits are often displayed in the lobby. Next to the lobby is the reading room, which has a capacity to seat 500 people, as well as reference rooms and specialized rooms with magazines, music, and research materials. There is also a room dedicated to Bogotá. This room, administered by the Chamber of Commerce of Bogotá, is furnished with maps, history books, and copies of recent legislation.

Virgilio Barco has a multiple-use room and auditorium that is used for seminars, conferences, concerts, and dance and theater presentations. The children's room is linked to the main building by a bridge. The room has child-size furniture, bookshelves, and bathrooms. There is a reading room, an Internet and multimedia room, a game room, and a workshop room. The children's collection includes books, educational videos, and compact discs.

EL TUNAL

Located in the south of the city in the Tunjuelito sector, El Tunal was the first new library to open. It was estimated that about 2,500 people would use the library each day when it opened in May 2001. By mid 2002, the library had more than 3,500 daily users. The library has already expanded its reading room and is moving the computer and Internet room into a bigger space.

The 6,828-square-meter library was designed by three architects—Manuel Guerrero, Suely Vargas, and Marcia Wanderley—and built at a cost of $4.5 million. El Tunal has about 290 chairs in the general reading room, 177 in the reference room, 16 in periodicals, 34 in the room devoted to Bogotá issues, 36 in the children's room, and 50 for multiple purposes. Its auditorium seats 250 people and a multiple-purpose room can accommodate 150. The current collection includes 35,000 books.

Twelve-year-old Juan Estéban would prefer to spend all his time in the library. He and his friends enjoy playing educational games through the Internet, reading colorful books, listening to music, and watching educational videos. "This is like a dream," he says.

Initially, the librarians were surprised to see the number of unaccompanied children at the library. Upon talking with some of the children, they became aware of some serious social problems. For example, 12-year-old

Four eighth-graders—Daniel, Juan, Javier, and Arley—answer questions for their English class. "Since we have the library, we all get better grades at school," says Daniel.

Carolyn was a regular user of the children's room. She enjoyed talking with the children's librarian. One day she began to cry, telling the librarian that her stepfather was abusing her sexually. The librarian took the girl to a social welfare agency where Carolyn told a social worker that her mother had abandoned her family and left her living in a small room with her stepfather. The girl is now protected by the Instituto de Bienestar Familiar (Colombia's Institute of Family Welfare).

Many children have told the librarians they have no place to go after school. Now, El Tunal offers cultural activities and training programs. Twice a week there are movie sessions for children. "We had never been to a movie theater before. My mother used to tell us that it was too expensive. But, here, you can go for free!" says 9-year-old Carla with a smile.

At El Tunal, the Internet room is always crowded, and the librarians are in high demand for services and advice. A grandparents' club has been organized at the library. Grandparents hold weekly reading sessions and attend regular computer training courses.

On a typical day, a 9-year-old from the Don Bosco School searches for "French dances." Her school is organizing a dance festival and she was assigned to look for information at the library. She is delighted to find a Web page with music and videos.

When Oscar Javier Vásquez arrived at El Tunal for the first time, he had no idea how to turn on a computer. "I asked for help from one of the employees, and he helped me immediately," this 14-year-old says. From that day, he became a daily user of the library. Because he suffers from migraines, Vásquez had stopped going to school. He sought out the director of El Tunal and offered to be a volunteer. "I offered to help other children and teenagers that come as ignorant about computers as I was," he explains. He has become a volunteer in all library activities and even offered to help out in the coffee shop. His favorite activity, however, is searching the Internet. Vásquez has used his new skills to learn about his illness and remains interested in medical-related Web pages. "After learning so many interesting things about the body and health care, I have decided that I want to become a doctor," Vásquez says. He plans to return to school as soon as his doctor gives permission.

EL TINTAL

El Tintal symbolizes creativity in the use of resources. Originally an abandoned garbage-transfer station, it was renovated at a cost of $4.5 million and opened in 2001. Today, more then 2,000 users visit on weekdays, and 3,500 patrons come to the library on Saturdays.

Located on the city's western fringe, El Tintal sits on the dividing line between working-class houses and the violent Patio Bonito neighborhood. Here there are no neighborhood movie theaters, shopping malls, or places where children, teenagers, or adults can spend their free time. El Tintal has became the preferred place of the local population. It offers 546 chairs for children, teenagers, and adults. The library's collection numbers about 28,000 books, and it has 64 Internet and multimedia stations; there are always long lines of children and teenagers hoping to use the Internet. The auditorium accommodates 150 people.

The architectural firm of Daniel Bermúdez and Cia Ltda. designed this library. Bright, airy hallways give onto glass-enclosed rooms where, on one recent morning, children from the Patio Bonito Public School were waiting in line to use the Internet. "At first, people were afraid to use the terminals to look up books, then to find them," says Library Director Imelda Rodriguez. "That is changing, and now the library is a social development center for the whole neighborhood."

In May 2002, a little boy with lemons hanging around his neck arrived at the door. "Can I get in here?" he asked one of the librarians. "Of course you can. This is a public library. Everyone is welcome," she answered. The 9-year-old could not believe it. He told the librarian that he is a street vendor selling lemons at stoplights. After he sells some lemons, he visits the children's room, where he loves to read the books. He leaves his lemons in the lockers where the other children leave their schoolbags.

Local and Neighborhood Libraries

Biblored distinguishes between "local" and "neighborhood" libraries, all of which are part of the Biblored system. The six newly upgraded local libraries are located in Suba, La Marichuela, La Victoria, Servitá, Restrepo, and Bosa. Ten smaller upgraded libraries, known as neighborhood or decentralized libraries, are located in such neighborhoods as Las Ferias, Nuevas Delicias, Perdomo, Timiza, Venecia, Puente Aranda, Ricaurte, and San Fernando.

Every day, dozens of students do their homework at these libraries. Many are located in impoverished and violent neighborhoods.

On one holiday in August 2002, four eighth-graders—Daniel, Juan, Javier, and Arley—were answering questions for English class. "Since we have the library, we all get better grades at school... . We always come together to do homework... . We generally find the books we need," says Daniel. Juan points out that they have also attended computer training programs, learning how to use Word, Excel, and the Internet. Both Daniel and Arley, whose mother packs bread in a bakery, want to become engineers and are finding out about scholarships.

These libraries are always extremely busy. Chairs are at a premium. Every day, librarians organize an hour dedicated to reading short stories or fairy tales to children. They also offer educational videos to teenagers.

Library as Lifeline

Another small library opened in the violent La Marichuela neighborhood in Ciudad Bolivar in southern Bogotá. One of the neighborhood libraries that is part of Biblored, it is visited by about 14,500 children, teenagers, and adults each month.

José, who is 9 years old, and Lady, his 11-year-old sister, bring their mother to the library every day. The children choose books, generally related to their homework, that they read to their mother, Carolina, who is blind. They also read her children's books, such as *Manuela Color Canela (Manuela, Cinnamon Color)*. "I am only able to see shadows," Carolina says. Carolina says that her children read the texts and that she helps them do the summaries for their homework, reminding them of key points. Carolina and her husband, who is also blind, earn a living and finance their children's studies by making brooms and trash bags. Carolina hopes that her children will become successful professionals. That's why she encourages them to visit the library every day.

During a recent visit to the library, Guillermo Antonio Niño Martinez, a 72-year-old grandfather, said that he comes to learn about things such as bakeries and woodwork. "I am old, but I still can learn. Even an old parrot can learn to talk," he points out with a smile. After learning how to make different kinds of breads, he taught his children bread making and opened a small family business. On a recent visit to La Marichuela Library, he was reading about how to repair radios and television sets. "These days you have to pay too much for experts to fix these things," he says. Martinez plans to offer his services to neighbors for a small fee.

Andrés, a 69-year-old man who fixes shoes, visits Suba's local library three times a week. He always brings his 9-year-old twin grandchildren, Camilo Andrés and Juan Sebastián. After spending some time reading, he says, "I must tell you that I was not socially accepted by many because I was a man dedicated to repairing shoes. Nevertheless, I feel proud of myself because I was able to provide my family with food and to send my children to study." Now retired, he dedicates his time to his real passion—reading. He loves learning about the arts and scientific discoveries. His favorite topic is astrophysics. While he reads, his grandchildren use the computers to do their homework. Andrés says he loves books as much as he loves his grandchildren. "Everything I read has an impact on me. Perhaps because I am so excited to learn, because I am so ignorant. I like to learn about everything. Libraries are the real paradise."

Credit: MARIA CRISTINA CABALLERO

José is reading about Colombian history to his blind mother Carolina. They frequently visit the "Marichuela," one of the neighborhood libraries.

During a recent visit, teenagers were watching a video about the consequences of drug addiction. Titled *Stuck in the Snow*, the video shows teenagers who became addicted to cocaine and started robbing their families to pay for their drugs. Asked about the video, 16-year-old Norbey Giraldo said, "To use cocaine doesn't generate anything good." Manuel Arenas, also 16, added, "To use drugs just causes a lot of problems for you and your family."

Administration

Espitaleta designed the administrative structure and defined the positions required for Biblored's operation. She trained the supervisory staff, and organized seminars and workshops. The mayor chose the first general manager.

Espitaleta visits a library each week to evaluate progress and challenges. The current manager of Biblored, Catalina Ramirez, also organizes weekly meetings of the directors of the main Biblored libraries in her office to evaluate administrative and budgetary issues.

Today, Biblored has a general assembly, a board of directors, and an executive director. Board members serve on committees dealing with executive issues, projects, finance, communications, and volunteer activities.

Vital to Biblored's success is BIBLOAMIGOS (Asociación de Amigos de la Biblored), a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to obtain and coordinate private-sector support for the project. Currently, BIBLOAMIGOS, under the direction of Clorinda Zea, is obtaining local funds to improve the libraries' collections, install new technologies, start a book lending program, enhance communications programs, upgrade cultural activities, and finance children's projects.

Crédit: MARÍA CRISTINA CABALLERO

***Lorena and Teresa are visiting El Tintal library for the first time. They became interested in the* Encyclopedia of Things that Never Existed.**

Created in May 2001 by Vélez White, BIBLOAMIGOS supports Biblored's operations and strengthens the network. It has already received private donations of books. BIBLOAMIGOS also administers the libraries' auditoriums; it is legally authorized to rent them for funds that help support the libraries.

General Manager Catalina Ramirez says the project needs funds to be sustainable. "We don't want Biblored to become a politicians' bureaucracy," she adds. During critical budget shortages, BIBLOAMIGOS has temporarily paid the utility bills, for example.

Biblored representatives receive the Access to Learning Award in Glasgow, Scotland, during the annual meeting of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Left to right: Biblored General Manager Catalina Ramirez; Bogotá's Secretary of Education Margarita Peña; Collections Librarian Piedad Ortiz.

Plans for the Access to Learning Award

Given Biblored's success and users' continuing demands, Secretary of Education Margarita Peña sees the Access to Learning award as a way to bolster resources. "The award provides this project with an excellent opportunity to broaden the scope and enhance the quality of services," she said. Her office is the primary financial supporter of the project.

Vélez White points to the need to improve Biblored's technological infrastructure. Award funds will be used to upgrade hardware and software, which will enable more users to access electronic information. Bandwidth will be increased.

Biblored also wants to develop an electronic library that will allow users access to reference information, particularly about local history and facts, and full texts. It also wants to develop its Web site (www.biblored.org) to broaden the scope of information services offered to Internet users.

According to Camila Rivera, an enthusiastic coordinator of Biblored who now works with the Minister of Education, the project is currently using 57 percent of its technological capacity.

"This award will allow us to expand Biblored services, providing access to information and new technologies in a democratic way," said Antanas Mockus, the current Mayor of Bogotá.

Former Mayor Peñalosa says that the award has helped to improve the self-esteem of Bogota's citizens and also generates pressure on current and future administrations to continue funding the libraries. "We have been trying to promote a new way of approaching life, pointing out that happiness doesn't come from buying things, and the malls must not become the axis of the citizens' lives," said the former mayor.

Bibloamigos plans to institutionalize an annual fund-raising event. "Each November there will be a party with music from different regions. The idea is to invite entrepreneurs and upper-middle-class people who are able to pay one million pesos (about U.S. $350) per couple to invest in the collections," according to Ramirez.

Continuing the Project: Confronting New Challenges

Biblored demands a significant part of the city's budget. Annual expenditures are about $2,173,000. The city covers the salaries of 177 full-time library employees, 61 of them devoted primarily to technology.

In 2002, questions arose about financing the libraries. "I have the impression that the noise around the operating budget of the libraries is taking place because some identify

them with my administration," said Peñalosa. "It was much more expensive to expand the capacity of the education system. They don't threaten to leave the schools without resources... . I wanted to leave the libraries a $40-million fund after privatizing Bogotá's telephone company, but it was not possible to sell it," he said.

General Manager Ramirez said the budget crisis had a direct effect on her staff. "A number of employees have had job contracts valid for just two to three months, which are extended only when the libraries get more money approved. This situation has caused a lot of unnecessary administrative work, generating lots of paperwork. The project has survived thanks to the employees' high motivation and commitment to the goal of providing a service to the neediest communities," she notes. "If they were not so committed, we would have had to close the libraries."

Biblored managers are preparing a five-year budget proposal for the City Council, hoping to make the project more sustainable over the long term.

Library Boom

In the fall of 2002, Biblored received an award from the newspaper *El Colombiano*, which recognized it as "the most exemplary Colombian project." Despite its budget problems, Biblored has generated enthusiasm for building more libraries in Colombia.

As a result, the Colombian Ministry of Education has launched a national program to support educational libraries. It has promised to invest about $9 million to upgrade 315 educational institutions' libraries.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture provided about $800,000 worth of books to improve the collections of the best-administered public libraries. The Colombian Bank of the Republic, which finances the BLAA, opened new libraries in six cities in 2002.

"One of my dreams is that in the future, we will have poets, intellectuals, who got their start in these libraries," Bogotá's current mayor, Antanas Mockus, says.

In the middle of a civil war, Colombia is trying to chart a new course. "It would be just ideal if books and computers could progressively replace guns," said Patricio Cuevas, 20 years old and a loyal user of Biblored.

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